The Doctrine of the Sword

By Mohandas Gandhi

In this age of the rule of brute force, it is almost impossible for any one to believe that any one else could possibly reject the awe of the final supremacy of brute force. And so I receive anonymous letters advising me that I must not interfere with the progress of noncooperation, even though popular violence may break out. Others come to me and, assuming that secretly I must be plotting violence, inquire when the happy moment for declaring open violence is to arrive. They assure me that the English will never yield to anything but violence, secret or open. Yet others, I am informed, believe that I am the most rascally person living in India, because I never give out my real intention and that they have not a shadow of a doubt that I believe in violence just as much as most people do.

Such being the hold that the doctrine of the sword has on the majority of mankind, and as a success of noncooperation depends principally on the absence of violence during its pendency and as my views in this matter affect the conduct of a large number of people, I am anxious to state them as clearly as possible.

I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence. Thus when my eldest son asked me what he should have done, had he been present when I was almost fatally assaulted in 1908, whether he should have run away and seen me killed or whether he should have used his physical force, which he could and wanted to use, and defended me, I told him it was his duty to defend me even by using violence. Hence it was that I took part in the Boer War, the so-called Zulu Rebellion, and the late war. Hence also do I advocate training in arms for those who believe in the method of violence. I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honor than that she should in a cowardly manner become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonor.

But I believe that nonviolence is infinitely superior to violence, forgiveness is more manly than punishment. Forgiveness adorns the soldier. But abstinence is forgiveness only when there is power to punish: it is meaningless when it pretends to proceed form a helpless creature. A mouse hardly forgives a cat when it allows itself to be torn to pieces by her. I therefore appreciate the sentiment of those who cry out for the condign punishment of General Dyer and his ilk. They would tear him to pieces if they could. But I do not believe India to be helpless. I do not believe myself to be a helpless creature. Only I want to use India's and my strength for a better purpose.

Let me not be misunderstood. Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will. An average Zulu is any way more than a match for an average Englishman in bodily capacity. But he flees from an English boy, because he fears the boy's revolver or those who will use it for him. He fears death and is nerveless in spite of his burly figure. We in India may in a moment realize that 100,000 Englishmen need not frighten 300 million human beings. A definite forgiveness would therefore mean a definite recognition of our strength. With enlightened forgiveness must come a mighty wave of strength in us, which would make it impossible for a Dyer and a Frank Johnson to heap affront upon India's
devoted head. It matters little to me that for the moment I do not drive my point home. We feel too downtrodden not to be angry and revengeful. But I must not refrain from saying that India can gain more by waiving the right of punishment. We have better work to do, a better mission to deliver to the world.

I am not a visionary. I claim to be a practical idealist. The religion of nonviolence is not meant merely for the Rishis and saints. It is meant for the common people as well. Nonviolence is the law of our species as violence is the law of the brute. The spirit lies dormant in the brute and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law - to the strength of the spirit.

I have therefore ventured to place before India the ancient law of self-sacrifice. For satyagraha and its offshoots, noncooperation and civil resistance, are nothing but new names for the law of suffering. The Rishis, who discovered the law of nonviolence in the midst of violence, were greater geniuses than Newton. They were themselves greater warriors than Wellington. Having themselves known the use of arms, they realized their uselessness and taught a weary world that its salvation lay not through violence but through nonviolence.

Nonviolence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean meek submission to the will of the evildoer, but it means the putting of one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant. Working under the law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire to save his honor, his religion, his soul, and lay the foundation for that empire's fall or its regeneration.

And so I am not pleading for India to practice nonviolence, because she is weak. I want her to practice nonviolence being conscious of her strength and power. No training in arms is required for realization of her strength. We seem to need it, because we seem to think that we are but a lump of flesh. I want India to recognize that she has a soul that cannot perish. And that can rise triumphant above every physical weakness and defy the physical combination of a whole world. What is the meaning of Rama, a mere human being, with his host of monkeys, pitting himself against the insolent strength of 10-headed Ravan surrounded in supposed safety by the raging waters on all sides of Lanka? Does it not mean the conquest of physical might by spiritual strength? However, being a practical man, I do not wait till India recognizes the practicability of the spiritual life in the political world. India considers herself to be powerless and paralyzed before the machine guns, the tanks and the aeroplanes of the British. And she takes up noncooperation out of her weakness. It must still serve the same purpose, namely, bringing her delivery from the crushing weight of British injustice, if a sufficient number of people practice it.

I isolate this noncooperation from Sinn Feinism, for, it is so conceived as to be offered side by side with violence. But I invite even the school of violence to give this peaceful noncooperation a trial. It will not fail through its inherent weakness. It may fail because of poverty of response. Then will be the time for real danger. The high-souled men, who are unable to suffer national humiliation any longer, will want to vent their wrath. They will take to violence. So far as I know, they must perish without delivering themselves or their country from the wrong. If India takes up the doctrine of the sword, she may gain a momentary victory. Then India will cease to be the pride of my heart. I am wedded to India, because I owe my all to her. I believe absolutely that she has a mission for the world. She is not to copy Europe blindly. India's acceptance of the doctrine of the sword will be the hour of my trial. I
hope I shall not be found wanting. My religion has no geographical limits. If I have a living faith in it, it will transcend my love for India herself. My life is dedicated to service of India through the religion of nonviolence which I believe to be the root of Hinduism.

Meanwhile, I urge those who distrust me not to disturb the even working of the struggle that has just commenced by inciting to violence in the belief that I want violence. I detest secrecy as sin. Let them give nonviolent noncooperation a trial and they will find that I had no mental reservation whatsoever.

In Hinduism the Rishis are Holy sages, one of those to whom the mantras and hymns of the Vedas (sacred texts) were revealed. In the epic poems and Puranas the Rishis are regarded as a particular class of beings, distinct from gods and men, the patriarchs or 'creators.' The seven great Rishis - Marichi Atri Angiras, Pulaha, Kratu, Pulastya, Vasishtha are associated with the Big Dipper constellation.

It is believed that Vishnu, the protector of the universe, would have 10 incarnations that would come down to earth to help mankind. At one time, there was an evil demon named Ravana, that all the other gods feared so much they asked Vishnu, the protector of the universe, to help them destroy him. Brahma had promised Ravana that none of the gods would be able to destroy him, so Vishnu promised the gods he would descend to the earth in human form. Vishnu was born on this earth as Rama, the son of a powerful king. With his wife, Sita, and the Monkey King, Hanuman, Rama went to Ravana's kingdom of Lanka, and was able to destroy Ravana.

In the 1920s, when Gandhi was writing, Sinn Fein (Ourselves Alone, pronounced shin fane), was a separatist political group in Northern Ireland; the militant Irish Republican Army (IRA) was part of Sinn Fein.

This reading is from The Class of Nonviolence, prepared by Colman McCarthy of the Center for Teaching Peace, 4501 Van Ness Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20016 202/537-1372